BETWEEN RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

In his 'The Production of Spaces', Henri Lefebvre[2] describes how our western industrialized world overwhelms us with concepts of objectifying abstraction. With this, he refers to the inherent characteristic of a consumer society wherein everything can be turned into a traded object, in such a way that even sensory aspects of our everyday life are dealt with in terms of quantifiable commodities and categories. He describes how concepts of objectifying abstraction stand at the basis of a professional authority, such as architecture, to describe and engage with abstract space by privileging the element of 'conceived space', and repress the element of experienced space or 'perceived space'[3]. This observation leads Lefebvre to distinguish two different types of spaces (or what he calls 'fields'); physical space (conceived as a product of processes of thinking, abstracting, measuring, categorising, etc.) and mental space (perceived through experience, memory, allegory, smell, touch, etc.). He also establishes a third field that he describes as social space, a space that can only be lived and that is a combination of physical space and experienced space,[4] becoming, as a result, a container of social myths and narratives.

By discussing two student design units developed as part of the curriculum of the Interior Architecture & Design course at Canterbury School of Architecture, I will describe our teaching activity as part of an interdisciplinary practice that accommodates a synergy between the description of objective propositions (i.e. conceived space) and the description of the ostensible, particular to the notion of the interior (i.e. perceived space).

As educators, in line with AP's practice, we contemplate space as deeply rooted in a cultural and socio-political history, thus acknowledging what Henri Lefebvre describes as social space; a space that is ultimately experienced and not merely objectively observed.

Consequently, in order to encourage the investigation of varying modes of conceived and perceived space, we design curricular structures that meander between the use of drawing, firstly as a representational tool according to traditional architectural professional codes, and aimed at describing quantifiable space; and secondly, the use of drawing as a perceptive tool in order to examine performative aspects of space in everyday life. As such, objective observations of the physical and technological are complemented with more subjective observations of the sensorial and emotional in order to enable a critical dialogue between that which might be categorized as scientific or 'object-driven' and that which might be characterised more as 'subject-driven'.

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Both case studies presented here illustrate how a critical attitude towards the representational tools by which students design can inform this search for conceived and perceived space. The first student design project was predominantly academic in nature and was developed at the start of stage 2 Interior Architecture and Design. The aim was to set up an environment for students to develop methodologies that facilitate the exploration of design/drawing through different levels of perception. This was achieved by annotating perceived space as opposed to measured or conceived space. The second case study describes a more applied project, developed as part of a two week workshop that took place towards the end of Stage 3 Interior Architecture &Design. Here, students deployed previously 'learned' methodologies as they designed interiors that address the concept of perceived space.

The first student design project "Lost in Space" delved into aspects of the unknown, setting up a design 'discourse as detour' to enable students to escape habitual design approaches and to engage more in conceptual experimentation.[5] The workshop combines two seemingly unrelated creative environments that serve as overlapping territories where students can research notions of spatial composition.

Students underwent training in contemporary dance for the duration of two weeks. The dance studio, led by Maltese choreographer Sandra Mifsud, served as an arena for experimentation, encouraging the Interior Architecture & Design students to study the relationships between inhabitants and their physical and cultural environment. As part of the dance training, students are required to develop a series of choreographic studies using their own body. They subsequently study their bodily compositions in space by relating to the drawing of axonometric diagrams that encoded these movements on paper (fig. 1). In preparation for the drawing of these diagrams, students recorded their choreographic studies by means of video and photography and edited this footage through postproduction software.

fig 1. Diagram series by Lilly Drolsum annotating negative space between body and space informing the design of an inflatable body armature to accommodate axial movement.

The project “Lost in space” aims at an investigation into new ways of looking at space, and thus new ways of ‘drawing’ space. It deals with aspects of the cinematographic and the unstable image, as addressed by Paul Virilio.[6] In his description of the Crystal Palace, for example, Virilio describes the building as a trellis of lines, deprived of any indication of scale and spatial hierarchy. The resulting interweaving of foreground and background prevents the user from appreciating its true dimensions. Virilio describes this as the crisis of the physical dimension.

The dance studio is exploited as a didactic slingshot manoeuvre that creates a supporting structure for students to rework habitual approaches relative to the subject of research and design. The provision of overlapping disciplinary trajectories as part of this curriculum prepares students to meander between the experiential and the analytical; syncopating between moments of spatial performance (i.e. choreographic studies using their own body) and moments that capture this performance through diagramming (fig 2).

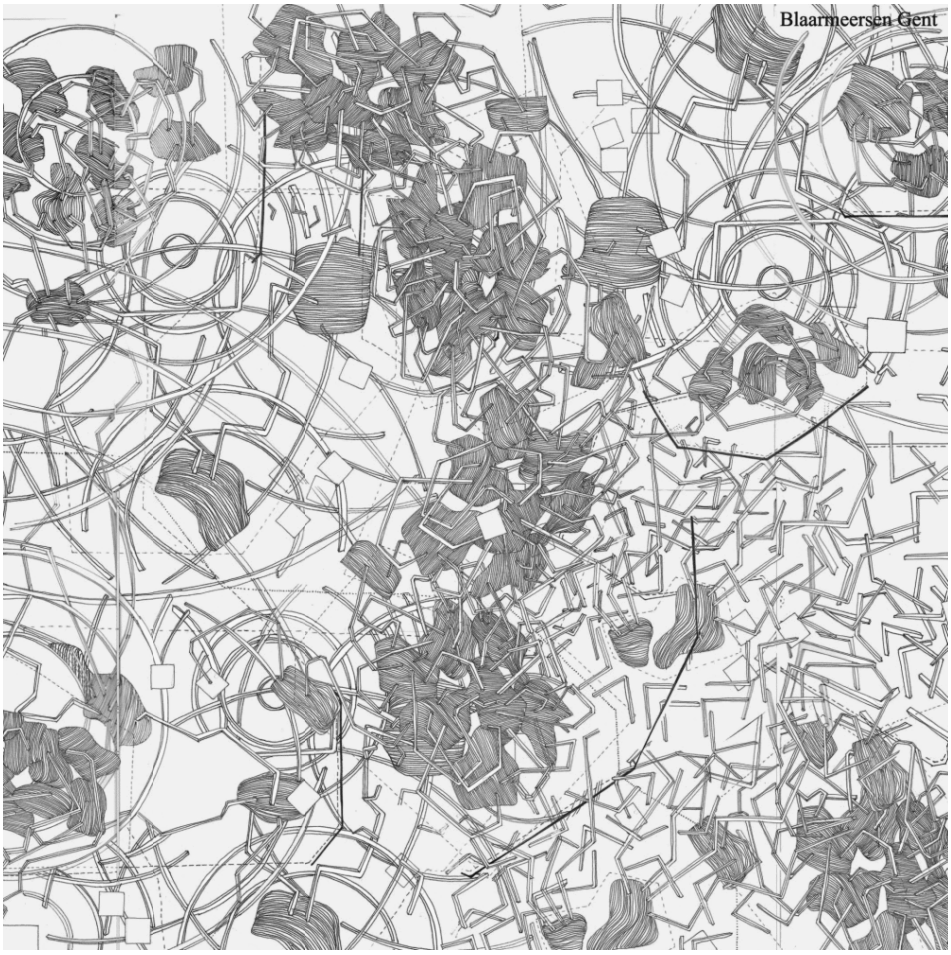

fig 2. Diagram by Marlies Vermeulen annotating spatial performance in search of forms of inhabitation exploring levels of density, modes of clustering, connecting and disrupting.

In this way, students are enabled to develop design/research agendas incorporating the description of an interior through the performance of the human body, in terms of both its physical and its socio-cultural resonance. The students' work consisted of aesthetic proposals that engaged critically with an increasingly global context, identifying with aspects of migration and notions of detachment and dispossession as expressions of a transient society. Projects acknowledged the importance of the 'unstable image' in order to address human occupation in time and space (fig 3). Here indeed the focus is on establishing a 'drawing language' to represent dynamic environments as opposed to the delineation of a stable object or series of objects. The exteriorization, or making visible, of these dynamic 'fields' aims to study the 'substance' of spatial performance by describing space that is searching for basic forms of orientation in 'time-space'.

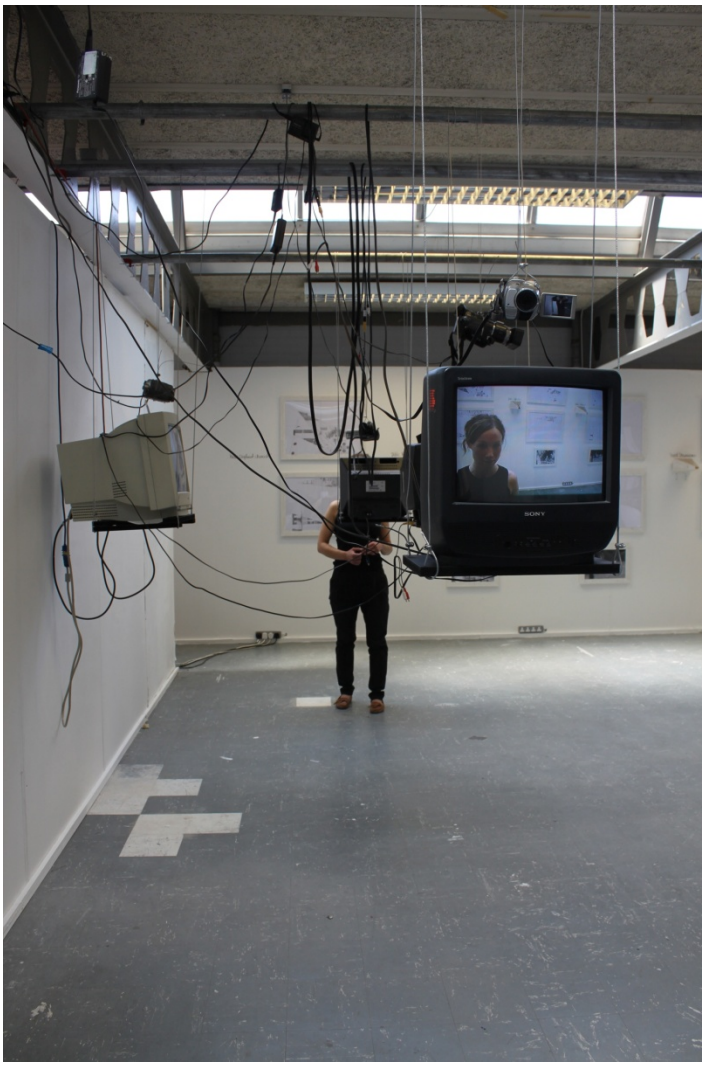

fig 3. Meta-morphosis by Tiina-Liisa Kujala exploring the deconstruction of perceived space to extrapolate the concept of social space.

The second case study illustrates how a heightened awareness of levels of perceived or experienced space can permit conceptual experimentation and the development of a critical proposal; it consists of a commentary on a 10-day workshop that is in search of workable strategies to describe interiors as zones of social demarcation or even sites for the making of kinship. More specifically, it correlates spatial narratives from different social groups and having different temporalities with the way the communities perceive the spaces they live in. To this end, we have been collaborating on a research project titled "The Reorientation of Sacred Places", a 3 year EU funded Program (2009-2011) organized by the Hogeschool voor Wetenschap&Kunst - Sint-Lucas Brussels in collaboration with Canterbury School of Architecture and a number of other universities.

Brussels was chosen as a site for investigation because, like many other European cities, it is undergoing a complex socio-political transitional process, with half of the current population now of non-Belgian origin. As part of this internationalization of Brussels, ideas on traditional religious beliefs and rituals, once key elements in spatial practice, are gradually being marginalized, occupying only the periphery of our post/super/alter modern society. As a result of this, old places of worship are gradually falling into disuse and becoming increasingly more detached from their socio-cultural fabric. As part of this research project, these places were identified as potential sites to support new cultural phenomena and to catalyse the re-establishment of a novel dynamic with their context. Essentially, this was achieved by studying emerging cultural phenomena particular to globalised territories where a coexistence of multiple religious groups nurtures varying levels of demographic segregation. Close-proximity cultural enclaves constantly claim new territory, giving rise to territorial shifts within the city.

Brussels, the capital of Europe, a self-proclaimed symbol of multiculturalism, is still struggling in this respect, resisting questions of openness, integration and coalition. This research project questioned, within this staging of oppositions, the 'po-ethics' of converting abandoned sacred places, circumscribing three ideological proposals; (a) approaching the question through non-hierarchical, trans-clerical concepts to generate new urban impulses and new socio-spatial connections, (b) approaching the question through the re-installation of singular ideologies with a focus on dynamic interrelationships, and (c) approaching the question through the concept of emptiness as a possible tool to celebrate that-what-is-not.

The design brief set to the students required them to look at a disused church and to observe and study its deeply rooted cultural and socio-political history, consequently concentrating on what Henri Lefebvre describes as mental space, one that is ultimately experienced and not merely objectively observed. As such, students are guided by means of a process of drawing where they do not only describe objective propositions but also observe notions of perceived space (fig 4). Drawing is used as part of a dialectic strategy to look beyond phenomenological space and engage with interior places as locations of conceptual interchange within a particular socio-cultural context.[7]

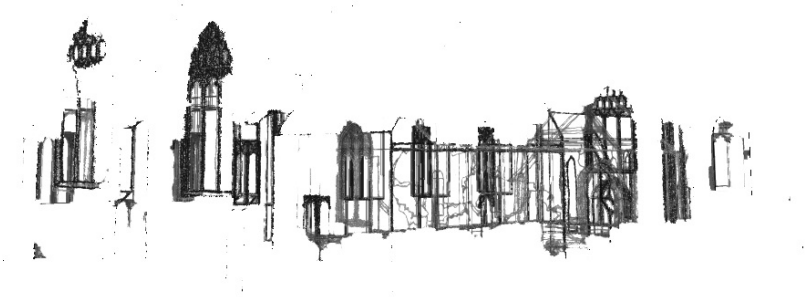

fig 4. Drawing by Sying Qui making visible historical layers of a church as part of an exercise to understand an implicit human narrative as such, negating the physical building to be the church.

As a further exploration of the demarcation of social space it would be pertinent to refer to one of the projects titled ‘de-form/re-form’ that aimed at the correlation of two types of spaces. The project looked at the abandoned church in terms of its physical reality, i.e. a conceived space, observing the church as abandoned and empty. However, ‘de-form/re-form’ also looked at the church as a ‘produced space’; a space that is experienced by the current multicultural community living around the empty building. In doing so, it was acknowledged that the former catholic community, for which the church was originally built, has been replaced by a mosaic of cultures, a community professing alternative faiths and religious beliefs, declaring this once catholic symbol obsolete. It was thus observed that the church is not abandoned at all, but fully experienced as empty and vacant and void of meaning. By observing this important nuance, this project succeeded in acknowledging both conceived and perceived space in and around the church, by annotating the church as physically and symbolically empty. The proposal suggested the need for a new symbolic denotation relevant to the current community that would transform the church both formally and in terms of its perceived image, engaging with Lefebvre’s social space: a space that is lived.

‘De-form/re-form’ altered the composition of the church by proposing the careful dismantling of the clock tower in order to re-install the detached tower horizontally,

penetrating the interior of the empty church (fig 5). By doing so, the project acknowledged the clock tower as part of a cultural code that traditionally located a community both in geographical and symbolic terms. The dismantling of the clock tower is in fact the material manifestation of the erosion of a close-knit community while the horizontal installation of the clock tower in the empty church interior reinstalls symbolic value, consolidating the emptiness of the church by installing a ‘fallen’ symbol that signifies a community of change, a transient society subject to notions of detachment and dispossession. ‘De-from/re-from’ approached the question the ‘po-ethics’ of reconverting abandoned sacred places through the concept of emptiness by annotating that-what-is-not; an interior previously filled with its congregation has been filled with signifying emptiness, a monument describing a new kind of social space.

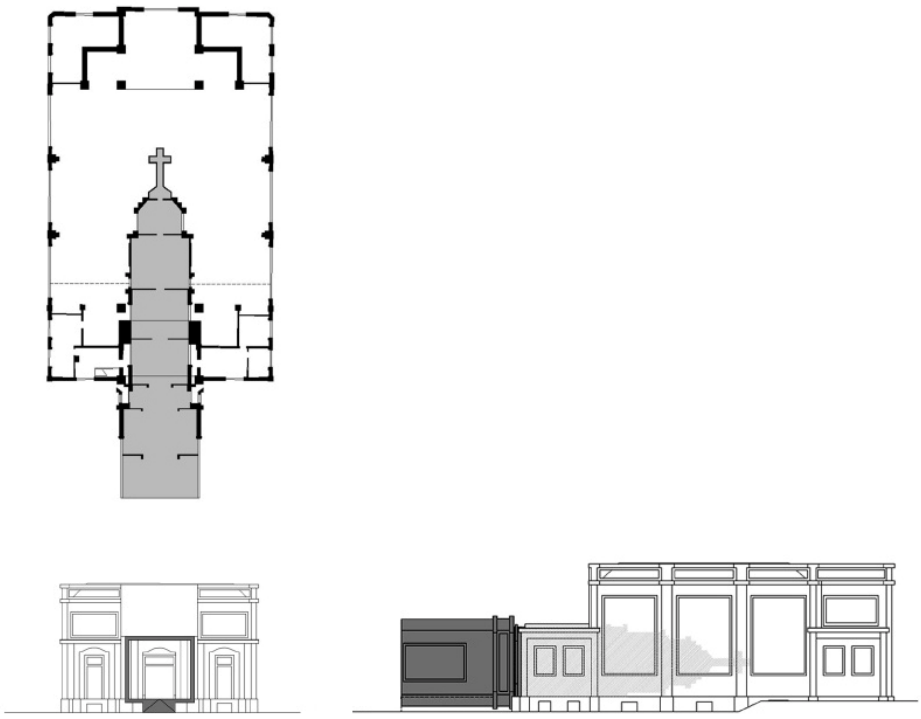

Fig 5. De-form/re-from design proposal by Daniel Tollady, Liisa Poime, Lien Velghe and Tahnee van Steenbrugge

Too often the notion of the interior is described as a mere detail pertaining to architectural and urban structures. This understanding of the interior, as defined by physical confinement, seems to drive (not always but often) the establishment of a conceptual imprisonment vis-à-vis a critical understanding of the interior. Interior negotiations often acquire qualities of the non-relational, the inherent and the singular. This confinement of the interior as a phenomenological entity needs breaking, initiating a supporting structure for a much broader discourse that addresses (interior) space as deeply rooted in a cultural and socio-political history, thus acknowledging what Henri Lefebvre describes as social space.

We want to announce a new attitude towards interior architecture and design where the activity is used as a platform for questioning spatial practice. It does what interior education needs to strive for; that is to act as a radical entity that does not aim at the restrictive delineation of its discipline but focuses on a perpetually shifting of the boundaries of its own disciplinary province to appropriate new and more engaging relational conditions with neighbouring artistic territories.

References

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6. Virilio, P.: *Lost Dimension;* (trans. Daniel Moshenberg)*;* Semiotext(e), c.1991, NY, NY. pp. 93-94.
7. The notion of 'conceptual interchange within a particular socio-cultural context' is viewed in line with the appreciation of cities as sites of transitional connectivity as explained in: Amin, A., Thrift, N.: *Cities: Reimagining the Urban*; Cambridge, Polity Press, 2002; pp.31-50.